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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000828

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [US](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN FONMIN CALLS FOR MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador William R. Brownfield for reason  
1.4 (b)

1. (C) Summary: Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez called to meet March 17 with Ambassador Brownfield. Rodriguez' ostensible purpose was to finally meet the Ambassador four months after becoming FonMin. Real reason probably was to support Chavez' "charm offensive" towards the USG. The Ambassador told Rodriguez that the GOV's negative approach towards the USG would increasingly affect bilateral relations. Rodriguez said the GOV wanted good bilateral relations, stressing Venezuela's reliability as an oil supplier. In a sharp change from previous policy, the FonMin said he would meet regularly and frequently with the Ambassador. He asked about possible meetings with USG officials when he goes to the OAS April 7 SecGen election, and also asked about a possible meeting between the USG and GOV energy ministers. The meeting reflects a tactical rather than strategic change by Chavez, to which we should respond tactically as well. End Summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, DCM, and Foreign Minister Rodriguez met March 17 at Rodriguez' request at 9:45 p.m. the night before. Rodriguez' ostensible purpose was to finally meet the Ambassador; what really drove the request appears to be Chavez' "charm offensive" of this week. The Ambassador kicked off the meeting by describing how the USG had signaled the GOV after the August 2004 referendum, and how the USG had concluded that the GOV did not want a more positive relationship. The result was that there would be increasingly public expressions of USG views on bilateral and democracy issues.

3. (C) Rodriguez responded that in his February trip to the US, he had met with former SecState Shultz. Shultz had advised him to distinguish between "problems of principle," and "practical problems," and to not turn the latter into the former. He said he had taken this advice to heart as FonMin. The Ambassador replied that there were very important areas in which the two governments disagreed, and the consequences would increasingly be part of the bilateral picture, and they would be public. There were, however, areas that both governments might agree to address: oil, counternarcotics, counterterrorism. On oil, Rodriguez reiterated his line that Venezuela was and always would be a reliable provider of oil, unless things got much worse. The Ambassador raised ExxonMobil's dispute with Rodriguez; after a lengthy defense of the GOV's decision to raise the royalty rate, Rodriguez suggested that a practical solution for both sides would be to assemble a package of ventures ExxonMobil was interested in participating in. On CN, the Ambassador told the FonMin there had been a recent negative development (withdrawal of National Guard from DEA vetted unit and removal of unit equipment); Rodriguez took notes and said he would investigate (comment: this problem appears to be a function of the National Guard commander rather than a result of bilateral problems.)

4. (C) Rodriguez raised the possibility of a meeting between Secretary of Energy Bodman and Minister Ramirez. He and the Ambassador agreed to discuss what items might be discussed at such a meeting, without committing to a meeting.

5. (C) Rodriguez also mentioned he would be in Washington April 7 for the OAS SecGen election; he expressed interest in possible bilateral meetings around this date. The Ambassador said he would consult with Washington.

6. (C) On visits, the Ambassador expressed regret that Sen. Coleman had had to make alternative plans given the inability of the GOV to commit in principle to a meeting with President Chavez. Rodriguez said that Ambassador Alvarez had already told him this this morning; he said that the GOV had always come through with presidential meetings for US congressmen; the Ambassador said that was true, but the last time around we had not received the go ahead until two hours before the meeting took place. (Embassy note: This required cutting short Codel's previously scheduled meeting with

opposition/civil society leaders.)

7. (C) The Ambassador noted that he had a good working relationship with Vice FonMin MaryPili Hernandez. In a sharp change from the previous GOV approach, Rodriguez said that he was willing to meet as regularly and as frequently with the

Ambassador as the Ambassador wanted.

18. (C) Comment: Ali Rodriguez has a reputation as both a committed leftist (a former guerrilla in the 60s) and as a pragmatist. The timing of the meeting, however, was driven by Chavez' decision this week to back off on his accusations against the US and to engage in a calculated thaw in bilateral relations. On Tuesday, the Communications Minister reached out to Ambassador; on Wednesday, the FM summoned him to a meeting; on Thursday Chavez said he wants good relations with the U.S.; and on Friday MFA issued a press communique on FM's meeting with Ambassador. These decisions, in turn, may reflect a decision by Chavez -- perhaps pushed by the Brazilian and other governments -- to back off wild accusations against the USG. At the same time, Chavez' decision may also serve the GOV as a sort of "see, we tried to engage the USG" argument for the future. This is a tactical change by Chavez, not a strategic one; still, there may be some room to exploit it.

Brownfield

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